

Preserving and Expanding Access to Public Papers **A Report of the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress**

On October 25, 2005, the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress hosted a day-long symposium on Presidential and Public Papers to explore the history of the 1974 Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act (PRMPA), its role today and current policy options and obstacles in archiving the papers of government officials.

Recent events in Washington, DC and around the country—from controversies over the writings of Supreme Court nominees to allegations of corrupt lobbying practices to the disclosure of the government’s secret domestic surveillance program—have underscored the critical importance of public access to vital documents, which are often extremely hard to locate and to assemble in a meaningful way. Not since the Nixon Administration has the debate about public knowledge taken on such a sense of urgency.

To address this important subject, the Brademas Center convened leaders in the field for a *Symposium on Presidential and Public Papers*. The symposium opened with a keynote address by Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States and featured three panels made up of archivists, historians, academics, lawyers and a former member of the Nixon Administration. The panelists discussed the history of the 1974 PRMPA, its role today and current policy options and obstacles in archiving the papers of government officials.

Recognizing the vital importance of open access to all Presidential and congressional documents, we make the following recommendations:

Developing a Public Policy:

A policy devoted to the preservation of congressional records would lessen the number of collections lost, destroyed or otherwise compromised. Archivists in the Senate and House of Representatives have developed records management guidelines for current members to follow so that their collections, when ready for donation, are more valuable and less bulky. However, the power of a statute would help archivists enforce these guidelines.

We recognize that there remain many challenges to creating an effective policy, including: 1) Members sometimes choose to donate their papers to inappropriate institutions—or simply do not donate them at all; 2) Modern methods of communications, such as email and the internet, have created new complexities in archiving; and 3) There has been a fierce political debate over the scope of executive privilege that has left policy-makers struggling to find the right balance between

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Develop a public policy to govern the disposition of congressional collections, paying special attention to the preservation of online information.**
- **Use the approach that is currently employed for preserving presidential papers as a model for dealing with congressional collections.**
- **Focus more attention on potential funding sources for preserving congressional collections.**

that privilege and the need for transparency and accountability. These issues must be addressed—not ignored—in order to give the American people access to as much information about their government as possible.

Using the Current Presidential Libraries Approach for Congressional Papers:

The national and very public nature of the Nixon scandal brought archival issues—including the creation of, access to, and disposition of records of public officials—into the spotlight and ultimately led to the independence of NARA from the General Services Administration. NARA also had to develop, over many years, guidelines governing presidential papers, including how to distinguish between personal and political papers. Similar attention must also be paid to congressional collections. Access to these records is just as important.

We therefore recommend that the Presidential Library system—known for its ease of use, centralization of resources and funding opportunities—be used as a model for dealing with congressional collections, both in terms of how to classify documents and how to catalogue and organize the collections. We acknowledge that there are some very real obstacles to effectively organizing congressional collections, including: 1) Collections are scattered all across the country in various kinds of repositories, making research both costly and time-consuming; 2) The methods of processing collections in those repositories are inconsistent; 3) Many repositories that receive large congressional collections do not have adequate resources to arrange, describe and provide access to them; and 4) There are more than 10,000 former Members of Congress whose papers potentially could be archived.

These obstacles should not stand in the way of the goal of cohesively organizing and cataloguing congressional papers. The more quickly and efficiently historians and researchers can obtain these collections, the better our nation’s history can be told.

Identifying Funding Sources:

Federal funds should be set aside for the preservation of the papers of public officials. There are other potential sources of funding as well: Research universities could be encouraged to develop programs to preserve such collections and the Library of Congress could be given incentives to develop programs specifically for the preservation of congressional collections. We encourage a more in-depth exploration of these possibilities and urge our counterparts to exhaust all avenues of funding in support of this necessary endeavor.

There is much to be done if this issue is to be addressed effectively. However, we hope that this brief report will be of use to policy-makers and researchers alike and will lay the groundwork for making strides on this important issue.

The Brademas Center is proud to contribute to the dialogue surrounding this issue. For more information on the event and a detailed list of panelists, consult the website for the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress at <http://www.nyu.edu/ofp/brademascenter/events.html>.